

# Eye in the Sky

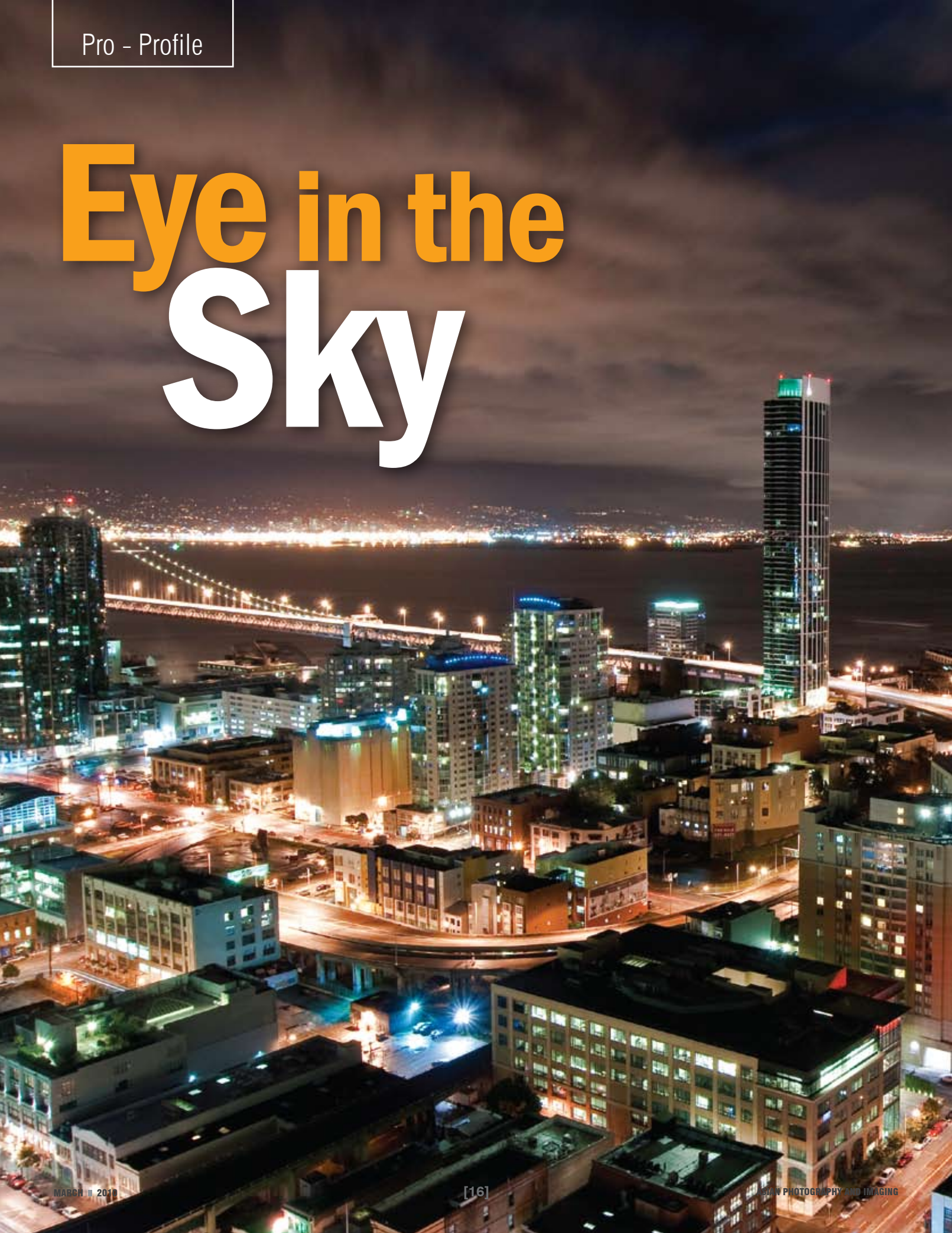




PHOTO BY ANDRE HERMANN

Scott Haefner

A brightly coloured kite shimmering in the sun is a sight to behold, but did it ever occur that it could actually watch you quite literally? A California-based photographer Scott Haefner mounts his camera on the kite line, lets it soar high up in the sky, and while it's at it, the kite keeps recording all what the earthlings are up to. Haefner, at the International Kite Aerial Photography Conference in November 2002, was honoured with the title of 'Most Promising New KAPer' (Kite Aerial Photographer). KAP is a popular hobby in the West started by British meteorologist Douglas Archibald in 1887 and Arthur Batut in Labruguière, France in 1888. But 'The Adventures of Scott Haefner' doesn't end there. Lowlight shooting, lightpainting, 360-degree panorama, gigapans and pole aerial photography are just some of the other techniques he is adept in. One is amazed to see how he creates drama in his images of abandoned sites and decrepit industrial scraps, missile silos and ghost ships. He shares with Asian Photography his experiences with KAP, lowlight shooting and lightpainting.



View from the rooftop of Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Co., downtown San Francisco. Lit primarily by ambient city lights, while the eagle with a handheld flashlight.



▲ Abandoned, cold war era Titan I Missile Silo, in Sutter Buttes, California. Nearly pitch dark room, lit by a handheld spotlight and a purple gelled strobe from behind.



**Burning Man, situated in northern Nevada's Black Rock Desert. Just moments before sunset**

**When did you take to photography and why?**

I got my first camera—against my parents' wishes—when I was 8 years old. It was a Kodak disc camera, the one with a 1cm negative that produced terrible quality pictures. My parents tried to discourage me because of film and developing costs. I started to get more serious about photography in high school when I purchased my first SLR camera for a photography course. I took the class three times for credit and never looked back.

**What made you take up such lesser explored techniques as KAP, low-light work and lightpainting among others?**

I am interested in these techniques because they allow me to capture unique images that stand out from typical snapshots. Shooting in low light enables me to sculpt and manipulate the light in front of my camera, lending more control and creative opportunities. I use flashlights, off-camera flash, and coloured theatrical gels – often in combination with natural moonlight – to “light paint” the scene during the exposure.

I frequently shoot in places that most people choose not to venture in. Photographing abandoned buildings and other forgotten places, often under the cover of darkness, is what captivates me the most. Documenting our history and creating art in locations that soon maybe destroyed in favour of new strip malls inspires a level of urgency not typically found in other forms of photography.

I use kite-lofted aerial photos to obtain a new perspective of largely familiar subjects that frequently look drastically different when viewed from above.

**Describe the procedure involved in setting up the equipment in each case?**

I house my Nikon D60 SLR with kit lens in a hand-built rig made of carbon fibre, which hangs from the kite line approximately 50–100 feet below the kite. Like most KAPers, I use a Picavet suspension to attach my camera. The Picavet is a cat's cradle-like device made up of string threaded through tiny pulleys. It is a self-leveling system that stabilises the camera by dampening motion and by inhibiting the camera's ability to twist.

I have about 750 feet of 250-pound test line on a halo spool, but I rarely use all of it; I tend to fly my camera only 20–100 feet above the ground. I always shoot with my lens zoomed out to its widest setting, 27 mm (35 mm equivalent). Shooting with a wide-angle view at relatively low altitudes enables me to capture the most unique perspective.

For night photography, a sturdy tripod is essential because exposure times range from approximately 2–10 minutes or more. Also, a dedicated cable release is necessary because most digital cameras cannot take exposures longer than 30 seconds without a cable release.

**You don't seem to have explored much of underwater photography or wildlife yet. Any particular reason?**

I do find underwater photography intriguing. However, I don't have the necessary equipment. But I do want to get certified in scuba diving sometime in the near future. One thing that is especially captivating is exploring sunken

shipwrecks. I just watched a documentary about shipwrecks in the Great Lakes (between the US and Canada) and learned that there are lots of opportunities available.

Although I haven't done much wildlife photography, I am very much interested in Landscape photography, which like wildlife photography, is often lumped into "outdoor" photography. In fact, this is where my roots are. Most of my early work falls into this category.

**Explain your fixation with derelict sites and industrial scraps?**

It's a little difficult to explain, but I think there are several factors. I am interested in the architecture and history... specifically the people that worked in these places and their stories. I am also very curious by nature—exploring abandonments is often a visceral and even spiritual experience. "Urban exploration" cuts to the core of an innate curiosity that exists within all of us; it also satisfies my sense of adventure and sometimes gives intense adrenaline rushes.

**Guest house of 1800s at Napa Soda Springs in Northern California. Lit the full moon and a xenon flashlight from the base of the facade and a strobe in the doorway.**





**The Thompsons' residence, former mining ghost town in Darwin, California. Lit by the full moon and a couple pops of a yellow gelled strobe inside the home.**

I am also very interested in finding and exposing beauty in decay. It's interesting to me that the appeal is nearly universal. While most "normal" people want to turn a blind eye to derelict buildings and pretend they don't exist, these same people can usually see the beauty in the art that we create.

**What kind of skills is required to attempt these styles?**

For KAP, it's important to be confident with flying kites. You need to know what to do when conditions aren't ideal and the kite dives or swoops to the side...not only to protect your equipment, but also to ensure the safety of passersby. It's also important to put yourself in the camera's vantage point and imagine what it is seeing to get the best pictures. This skill is developed with experience.

For light painting, digital cameras make the learning process relatively quick since you can see the results instantaneously and reshoot the

scene again until you are satisfied. It's important to consider the angle you are painting from for the effect you are trying to create, and generally it's best to light paint from a fixed point to ensure crisp shadows.

**Tell us about some of your favourite, winning shots. Share some interesting experiences.**

For me the experience is often about the entire adventure...not just the photography. One of my more memorable trips was to a rocket test launcher in the hills south of San Jose, California. To reach the remote site, we had to bike six miles over rugged terrain at night, with only the light of the full moon to guide us. We had tripods, lights, camera gear, water, food, and sleeping gear so we could spend the night out there. I slept near the top of the launcher, nearly 100 feet off the ground, after shooting until almost 4am. When I awoke the next morning, I took some daytime shots as well before we hopped on our bikes and ventured out.



**Generally, how much time in terms of preparation, research, and getting legal permissions in place is required to get started? How do you narrow down on the shooting spots?**

Sometimes, I do have permission to shoot at a particular site, but most of the time I don't. Since I am interested in the history of the places I visit, I spend a lot of time researching them on the Internet. Oftentimes, I research after the shoot, in particular when I'm writing the photo captions. I also research new locations on the web, using tools such as Wikimapia, satellite imagery, flickr, uer.ca, etc. I also learn about sites through friends and word of mouth.

In addition, I am a visual person, and I'm always on the lookout for new sites. I often imagine what a subject might look like from above, and make a mental note when something seems like it might be interesting to shoot from the kite.

**What kind of reactions do you get from the passers-by? Do they sense you are doing much more than just 'flying kites'?**

I have a remote control device to control the camera, and it's easy to see the camera dangling from the kite if you're paying attention. Many times,

passersby figure out exactly what I'm doing. Other times, they ask questions out of curiosity. Still other times, I sense that people are intrigued and want to ask me what I'm doing, but they resist... probably because they are shy.

Most of the time, I enjoy interacting with strangers while I'm flying my kite cam. It can be distracting when I'm trying to focus on getting the shot, but it also breaks down some of the social barriers that we put in place during our normal routines, which is nice. I've met plenty of people that I would have never talked to under other circumstances.

**Which according to you is the most challenging technique? What limitations do they have? How do you manage to divide your attention between the ground and the sky while attempting KAP?**

With KAP, the most challenging aspect is getting the shot in less than ideal wind conditions. When the wind is turbulent, it can become risky and even potentially dangerous. In ideal conditions, it is very low-key and even sometimes relaxing. I usually launch the kite and fly it for a few minutes to assess the situation. If I don't feel



**The Palace Theatre in Gary, Indiana. Lit by ambient daylight and handheld flashlight**

comfortable I sometimes leave the camera in the bag and pack the kite up.

**What sort of hostilities do you have to brave? From people, the weather, natural conditions etc?**

As I said earlier you have to be very careful where you step in unstable, decrepit buildings, especially when wandering around in the dark. Another potential hazard is vagrants, but I have never had a threatening encounter. Typically, the people we run into in abandonments are not hostile, and we just try to ignore each other. Occasionally, a conversation ensues, but it's usually pleasant.

**What can be achieved with KAP that can't be achieved with the help of any other means, say a helicopter to take aerial shots?**

There are several advantages to KAP:

a) It is low-cost, and almost anyone can do it. It can range from an inexpensive setup based on a disposable camera, to a fully remote controlled

system with video downlink like I use. Even with a more advanced system, it's still a lot cheaper than hiring a helicopter.

b) I can get my camera in places that would not be possible any other way, and without disturbing the environment. For instance, I can hover my camera just above the subject, sometimes just a few feet away. One of my favorite shots is a fountain where the water spray is just below my camera, about 75 feet above children playing below.

**India celebrated International Kite Flying Festival in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in January, 2010. Did you partake in it? If yes, what sort of experience did you have?**

I wish I could have attended! I was lucky to be invited to a kite festival in Japan several years ago that I really enjoyed.

**What has been your most ambitious project so far? Or is it yet to come?**

The typical D-shape architecture shared by many other Native American central complexes is revealed in this aerial view of Pueblo Bonito at Chaco Culture National Historic Park in New Mexico.







◀ The International Fountain in Seattle. The camera hovers just beyond the water's reach

It is probably still yet to come. It seems like my friends and I are always pushing to find better locations, to up the ante so to speak. However, I am not sure how sustainable this is long term.

**Tell us about your future projects.**

I am going to New York with a friend in a couple weeks. We are going to be documenting hotels in the Catskills region for a book project he is working on. In addition, we will hopefully visit several industrial sites, state hospitals, and other

historic, abandoned locations.

We are currently working on a very ambitious project that has been in the works for a long time, but I can't reveal details just yet. We will begin publishing photos when we are finished with the location in a few months or so.

*Scott Haefner is involved with an online community called Urban Exploration Resource (uer.ca) that focuses on urban exploration, discussion forums and location databases. [www.scotthaefner.com](http://www.scotthaefner.com). Email: [scott@thehaefners.com](mailto:scott@thehaefners.com)*

— Debdutta Ray